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Maclean's

'Overtime is bad for the heart'

By: Cathy Gulli (May 12th, 2010)

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Working overtime puts people at increased risk of coronary heart disease, according to a new study published in the European Heart Journal. CHD occurs when plaque builds up in and narrows the arteries through which blood reaches the heart, which can lead to a heart attack. Specifically, working three to four hours extra (amounting to an 11- or 12-hour work day) was associated with a 1.56-fold increased risk of CHD.

Previous studies have shown that overtime work is linked to hypertension, sleep problems and depression. Recently, the sixth annual How Healthy Are You? series in Maclean's revealed that many Canadians are experiencing symptoms such as sore muscles and joints, family conflict, and fatigue since the recession began, largely because they are taking on extra responsibilities—and stress—in the workplace.

The European researchers followed 6,014 British civil servants aged 39 to 61 for 11 years. Just less than half worked at least one hour of overtime a day, or up to four hours. Those who worked overtime were more often young, male, married or living with a partner, and in more prestigious occupations. The risk of CHD increased in tandem with the number of extra hours worked.

Overtime workers slept less, and reported higher rates of "psychological distress," according to the study. They often exhibited "Type A behaviour," which the researchers define as "a chronic, incessant struggle to achieve more and more in less and less time, and is also believed to be characterized by aggressiveness and irritability," which is also a risk factor for CHD. The researchers also speculate that overtime workers ignore illness, which may aggravate health problems over the long-term.

Perhaps surprisingly, these participants did not exhibit other behaviours that would compromise their heart health: Overtime workers did not drink excessively, smoke or have diabetes. In fact, they actually had better habits—consuming more fruits and vegetables and exercising more often—than those workers who never clocked overtime hours.

In an accompanying editorial entitled "Overtime is bad for the heart," Gordon McInnes of the University of Glasgow concludes with a quotation from English philosopher Bertrand Russell: "If I were a medical man, I should prescribe a holiday to any patient who considers work important."